

BHA gets \$290,000 from FEMA

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BRATTLEBORO - Brattleboro Housing Authority's ongoing efforts to protect its residents from the next flood got a little easier after FEMA agreed to award the group \$290,000 through the federal Public Assistance program.

FEMA generally tries not to give out grants for projects that are likely to be flooded again, but the federal agency announced this week that it would be giving BHA the money since it was taking steps to move its residents out of the floodway.

The money will be used to repair some of the damage caused by Tropical Storm Irene, as well as to floodproof homes and equipment at Melrose Terrace in case the Whetstone Brook floods again.

"We are pleased that we are able to help the residents of Melrose Terrace, many of whom are seniors or people with disabilities, while the Brattleboro Housing Authority seeks a long-term housing solution for these residents," said Mark Landry, FEMA federal coordinating officer for Vermont.

During Tropical Storm Irene the Whetstone Brook flooded and 17 buildings at Melrose Terrace were damaged.

Residents were evacuated the day before the storm, and no one was injured during the flood.

BHA is in the process of looking for alternative sites for many of its residents, and has held a series of public meetings to find a new location for a public housing project.

BHA Deputy Director Mary Houghton said that while it has been a challenge to work through the maze of federal applications to recover funding following Tropical Storm Irene, FEMA officials have been helpful in assisting as the housing authority makes plans to get its residents out of the floodway.

"I think there is an understanding on FEMA's part, that we have people living here now, and they will be here until we can move ahead with our redevelopment," Houghton said. "Whatever we do, there will be housing here in the future and FEMA says that in the meantime it makes sense to minimize future damage."

While BHA's insurance covered about \$1 million in post-Irene cleanup costs, FEMA agreed to use \$90,000 from its public assistance program, which typically allows state, municipalities and certain nonprofits to repair roads and bridges, hospitals and schools and other infrastructure damages in natural disasters.

FEMA also allowed BHA to use \$200,000 from its Mitigation Program to install aluminum flood shields, replace baseboard electric heaters with elevated electric heaters and to raise kitchen stove outlets and electric water heaters a foot above the 100-year flood plain.

Landry said that while FEMA usually does not provide funding for buildings that are likely to be damaged again, the housing authority's evacuation plan, and its ongoing attempt to find new housing sites, convinced the federal agency to relax its otherwise strict guidelines.

"FEMA recognizes that these are temporary measures and that relocating these people safely outside the floodplain is the preferred solution," he said. "But until that is accomplished, these steps coupled with BHA's evacuation plan, will allow the residents to continue to live in Melrose Place and to avoid the kind of costly property damage if another flood occurs similar in magnitude to Irene."